

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

SYNTAX COMPETENCY AND READING COMPREHENSION

By

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THE BOYER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, 2004

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This research considers why many children struggle with reading comprehension in the elementary grades. As states implement mandatory retention for students who cannot pass reading competency tests, it becomes imperative to help those who struggle to achieve the minimum criteria. This research looks at the correlation between oral competency with Standard American English syntax and the tested reading comprehension level of 3rd grade students. These research questions were considered:

1. Is there a correlation between Standard American English syntax competency and reading comprehension in 3rd grade students?
2. Do specific types of syntactical deviations correspond more closely with reading comprehension ability than other types of syntactical deviations?
3. What syntactical deviations are common among 3rd grade students?
4. Are there specific syntactical deviations that are more prevalent among students belonging to a particular race, gender, or year in school?

A sample population was given the Structured Photographic Expressive Language Test–II to assess the students’ competency in formulating common Standard American English syntactical forms. Correlation statistics compared the variations of Standard American English syntax competency to the subjects’ tested reading comprehension level on the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test.

The results showed a positive correlation coefficient of 0.50 between syntax competency and reading comprehension scores. More than 20% of the sample used nonstandard syntactical forms for reflexive pronouns, past tense verbs, cojoined sentences, past copulas, plural nouns, and infinitives. Many of these forms were based on the students’ use of African-American English. Male students used slightly more nonstandard syntactical forms than the female students. There was a strong correlation between the number of retentions and nonstandard syntactical usage.

This study should prompt educators to look at the role syntax plays in the development of reading skills. Schools should consider whether adequate instruction is available to assist minority students in preparing for the Standard American English syntax encountered on high stakes tests; and teachers should educate themselves about the syntactical variations commonly used. Finally, retention rates should be examined to see if an unconscious language prejudice exists when teachers are making retention decisions.